

THE DECLINE OF BYZANTINE CIVILIZATION IN ASIA MINOR, ELEVENTH-FIFTEENTH CENTURY

Remarks on the Dumbarton Oaks Symposium of 1974

SPEOS VRYONIS, JR.

THE region of Asia Minor has figured importantly from earliest times in the history of the Mediterranean world and of the Near East. The size of the peninsula, its location, and its human and natural resources have played significant roles in the flow and ebb of political power and in the economic and cultural currents which have characterized that part of the world, with the result that Asia Minor has occupied the attention not only of rulers and generals but also of scholars. This scholarly tradition begins very early.

Herodotus, himself an Anatolian, in his scheme of quasi-universal history placed Anatolia as the meeting ground first of Lydians and Greeks, then of Persians and Greeks; that is to say, of East and West. Strabo's (64/63 B.C.–A.D. 21) *Geography* is the first surviving attempt at a comprehensive description of this broad region in terms of human geography. Himself a native of the Anatolian city of Amaseia, Strabo had certain advantages which he supplemented with travels to various districts of the peninsula. Consequently, books XI–XIV of his *Geography* constitute the single most informative text for a knowledge of ethno-linguistic groups and the economic resources of Asia Minor for over a thousand years. It is especially distressing that the genre of Greek geographical literature represented by Strabo's work was largely nonexistent in Byzantine times. The information in the works of Constantine Porphyrogenitus is penurious, somewhat anachronistic, and difficult, while the various Byzantine episcopal lists are skeletons in every sense. As was the case with a number of Greek genres taken over by the Arabs, geographical writing was greatly enriched in the hands of the Muslim geographers. Here I refer to factual content rather than to structural and

scientific character. The Arabs and Byzantines contested political and military hegemony in Asia Minor, Syria, and Armenia, with the result that Muslim statesmen, generals, merchants, and scholars had an interest in Asia Minor. Al-Balkhi/al-Istakhri, Ibn Khurdadbeh, and all their plagiarizers try to convey to the Muslim reader some sense of the stronghold of Islam's enemy. Their studies rely heavily on eyewitness accounts derived from travelers, generals, and merchants. The tradition of Islamic interest and writing about Anatolia continues into the transitional period concerning us with two fascinating works: that of the merchant Ibn Battuta, who in his travels from the Maghreb to China passed through Asia Minor and recorded economic, political, and cultural data with a fresh directness; and that of the armchair geographer al-Umari, who utilized two native informants, very much as anthropologists and language instructors do in some of our universities.

Such a native informant was the geographer Yacut (1179–1229), born in Byzantine territory, captured as a boy, and sold into slavery in Baghdad. There he was converted and eventually manumitted, became a merchant to the Persian gulf, and wrote the geographical compendium *Kitab Mu'djam al-Buldan* with entries from both Muslim and Christian Anatolia. The establishment of political capitals in Anatolia in the Late Middle Ages resulted in a strengthening of the interest of the learned in the affairs of the peninsula and the appearance of local historiographical traditions at Nicaea, Konya, and Trebizond alongside those of the Armenians and Syrians. With the transference first of the Greek capital and then of the Turkish capital to Constantinople, the focus of such Anatolian-centered writing shifted drastically.

The tradition of travelers interested in Asia Minor (and here I do not mention the vast Ottoman administrative archives) continues and intensifies greatly from this time on. Generally their interest may be seen in three facets: there is classical antiquity and the antiquarian-humanists, such as Ogier de Busbecq, pursuing coins, inscriptions, and flora with a passion which the locals must have deemed bizarre in the extreme. However, the interests of de Busbecq's compatriot and contemporary, Hans Dernschwam, were purely economic and practical. As an agent of the banking house of Fugger, he had not yet discovered the economic value of ancient coins (as have the modern Swiss banks), and so concentrated on the products and technology of local agriculture and industry. Finally, there is a lively continuation of interest, on the part of such travelers as Evliya Chelebi, in the religious life and shrines of Anatolia.

The appearance of Heinrich Schliemann and his excavations at Troy bring us full circle in what one may describe as the romance of Anatolian discovery, particularly as seen through the traveler accounts with their dreamy and romantic sketches of crumbling Greek temples adorned with drawings of neo-classical nymphs and pans and an occasional nomad. We are, in a sense, at the beginning of the cycle of scientific investigation of the area as per Strabo. Scholars attempted to ascertain the past history of this huge land mass through the inauguration of excavations at a number of important sites, both Hittite and classical: Pergamum, Ephesus, Sardes, Aphrodisias, and others. Thus there is a shift from celestial nymphs and pans to earthly pots and pans. The indefatigable Louis Robert has attempted to amass the epigraphic evidence in a lifetime's work, and his herculean effort will enslave, if not enthrall, generations of scholars who will have to integrate his fragments into a synthesis of the area's history. Art historians have struggled with the almost hopeless task of categorizing the architectural monuments and mural paintings which are disappearing daily before their eyes. Numismatists and sigillographers carefully glean, with ant-like labor, the final remainder of the once vast body of coins and seals. It is obvious that all of these tasks

remain uncompleted, and yet there have been significant attempts at synthesis of the material since Schliemann's time. A. Goetze's *Kulturgeschichte des alten Orients, Kleinasien 1933* (Munich, 1957) is a masterful synthesis of over a millenium of early Anatolian history on the basis of a very limited number of excavations and subsidiary materials. He gave that region its mythological past, its giants and its titans. David Magie's *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* (Princeton, 1950) is, however, the reverse, a synthesis of vast amounts of individual data in two fat volumes which give the outlines of administrative and political structure, much as if Anatolia had been a bureaucrat's model or dream—pure structure and no people. J. C. H. Broughton remedies this somewhat with an economic account of Anatolia during the Roman period, where Asia Minor appears as a bureaucrat's model which produces income and pays taxes. A. H. M. Jones bestowed the gift of Graeco-Roman urban society upon its inhabitants. William Ramsay, that modern-day consort of Cybele, endowed Anatolia with a soul by giving it religious permanence and persistence. . . all of which would make a delightful study for the analytics of Neofreudians. Karl Friedrich and Karl Holl, in their classification and study of the Anatolian tongues, have given speech and a type of ethnicity to various groups in the ancient and late ancient period.

It might be adjudged impious of the organizer of this Symposium to have proceeded to discuss the decline of Byzantine civilization from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries before the appropriate scholar-deities had consummated the creation of Byzantine Anatolia in the period from Constantine to the eleventh century, endowing that period with its soul, tongue, body, and economic ritual, as Ramsay, Broughton, Goetze, and others have done for the earlier periods. But piety should never be a deterrent to the historian, for though our knowledge of this period is incomplete and always will be because of the paucity of the sources, the sources for the period of decline are somewhat richer. Nevertheless, it is true that a systematic study of the available sources for pre-eleventh-century Anatolia remains one of the most important *desiderata* of Byzantine scholarship and will

provide the subject and content of a future symposium. It would have been a suitable topic for the present one, but sufficient work has not yet been done, though it is progressing in certain disciplines. In contrast, the works of Byzantinists and Islamists for our Symposium period have progressed somewhat further and have produced substantial works in terms of edited texts, and especially in terms of monographic studies. One need only refer to the more recent work by H. Ahrweiler on Nicaea, by P. Charanis on Anatolian ethnography, by A. A. M. Bryer on Trebizond, by Osman Turan on the Seljuks, and by Paul Wittek and others on the Beyliks. Finally, I should indicate that the subject is so large that it would have been impossible to study in one symposium the decline of the Armenian and Syrian Christian groups as well. This, too, would make the subject of an excellent symposium at some future time when more research has been done on the impact of the Turkish conquests and of Islamization on those two important ethnic groups.

In his paper, "Cultural Diversity and the Breakdown of Byzantine Power in Asia Minor" (*supra*, p. 1), Peter Charanis first delineates the factors which made western and central Anatolia the bulwark of the Byzantine Empire. Demographic growth and cultural integration had created, by the ninth century, a region of numerous towns and healthy village communities populated predominately by Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians, the Rhomaioi. This socially diversified populace of soldiers, ecclesiastics, magnates, peasants, craftsmen, merchants, and foreigners provided the Byzantine state with a sound social and fiscal structure and was its chief source of men and money. This Byzantine Asia Minor did not last long beyond the tenth century, and its decadence is a principal cause of Byzantine decline. By the end of the eleventh century, the free peasantry fell prey to the land hunger of the magnates, and the decline of the soldier-farmer class was accompanied by the growth of mercenary armies. Consequently, Asia Minor declined in importance as a source of money and manpower. The eastern expansion of the Empire in the latter tenth and eleventh centuries brought new peoples with strange

tongues and different religious affiliations, and the settlement of Armenians and Syrians in the regions around Cappadocia introduced tensions and entities that seriously disrupted the unity and homogeneity of that area. At this moment of social and ethnic disequilibrium there appeared a new and vigorous foe, the Turkish nomads.

The amputation which the Empire suffered in the loss of central and western Anatolia to the various Turkish groups of the eleventh-twelfth century was accompanied by a blow to the heart of the Empire, the Latin capture of Constantinople in 1204. Hélène Ahrweiler treats the historical question which arose at precisely this point: would the old imperial ideology, centered in Constantinople, survive or would it be replaced by an ethnic-provincial ideology? She has treated this basic question within the Nicaean parameter and indicates clearly in her presentation, "L'expérience nicéenne," the answer: "L'an prochain à Constantinople" (*supra*, p. 21). All discussion of the Nicaean state is linked to 1204, for without the Fourth Crusade the Empire of Nicaea would never have come into existence. Nicaea became the hearth of Byzantine and Orthodox "national" sentiment, the principal aspiration of which was to restore the Empire in Constantinople. The Constantinopolitan refugees who established themselves in Nicaea became the guiding spirit of this view and to this end made of Nicaea a servile copy of the old Constantinopolitan Empire. In order to effect this program, the Constantinopolitan aristocracy and bureaucracy had to rely upon and to develop the local elements and strengths. These latter consisted of a local aristocracy with its own interests, a rural populace which had already had to bear the ravages of nomadic depredations, Byzantine fiscality, and magnate rapacity, and which on occasion had displayed hospitality or indifference to Constantinople. Nicaea was thus, socially, an incomplete symbiosis of Constantinople and "Micrasiates." The reliance upon the local population in the beginning favored the development of what has been called by some scholars the neo-Hellenic "nation." This development was aborted when the Constantinopolitan class triumphed under Michael VIII with his reconquest of

Constantinople in 1261. They put themselves in the service of the imperial idea once more at the expense of the vital forces of the Greek "nation." Thus the national cohesion of Nicaea was only an appearance, and the crisis occasioned by the opposing interests of Constantinopolitans and Micrasiates was decisive.

The decline of Byzantine civilization in Anatolia is closely related to the two distinct phenomena of nomadization and Islamization, themselves the direct results of the double nature of the Turkish conquests: nomadic and sultanic. The author examined the effect of nomadization on Byzantine civilization and its importance in the decline of this civilization in "Nomadization and Islamization in Asia Minor" (*supra*, p. 41). Specifically, the dynamics of Turkish nomadism in the western, mountainous periphery of Anatolia was the subject discussed. By the end of the reign of Alexius I (1118) the highlands separating the Anatolian plateau from the western riverine-maritime regions came to be a primary area of nomadic settlement and also the boundary between sedentary and nomadic peoples. This boundary, despite considerable fluidity, remained fairly constant in the twelfth century, and portions of it survived until the reconquest of Constantinople in 1261 and the decline of the Konya sultanate. Thereafter, the various nomadic groups carried all before them in their drive down the river valleys to the Aegean, and in the fourteenth century they replaced Byzantine authority with a number of Turkmen principalities. The nomadic character of these new conquerors is significant for the fate of Byzantine civilization in many areas. They were essentially nomads who lived from raiding and from their flocks, they were loosely associated with the *jihād* against Christianity, and they came in substantial numbers. Their warfare and invasions (as opposed to those of the sultans) were between farmers and herdsmen, and when they entered an area the local population was frequently killed or enslaved, or else it fled, abandoning land and possessions to the nomads and their flocks. Consequently, much of the Greek rural population disappeared and many villages and towns were destroyed. So long as the central authority of the Byzantine state was strong, the nomads were no match by themselves for the

Byzantine armies and fortified towns, but when the central authority declined the nomads moved relentlessly. The continuing and repeated nomadic conquests and settlements in western Anatolia greatly disrupted and partially destroyed Byzantine civilization there. Their appearance constituted an ethnic migration of a people with a radically different way of life.

One of the greatest lacunae in our understanding of Byzantine Asia Minor is our imperfect knowledge of the Byzantine monuments of this vast region. Though the efforts of William Ramsay and Père de Jerphanion had rescued much archaeological evidence of the Byzantine period, a great deal has been destroyed and thus lost forever to history. Nicole Thierry has placed us all in her debt by her heroic efforts to record other such monuments before they, too, disappear. In her presentation, "L'art monumental byzantin en Asie Mineure du XI^e siècle au XIV^e" (*supra*, p. 73), she called attention to three aspects of this archaeological evidence: (1) Methodology. The surviving monuments are unequally distributed and remain, frequently, without a satisfactory recording. Historical conclusions should be based on monumental series rather than on isolated monuments. These monumental agglomerates, six in number, include: Tortum area, Kurdistan, central Cappadocia, Kara Dag, Myra, and Latmus. Classification of the Byzantine monuments should proceed in consonance with their diverse constituent elements (history of the region, architecture, program and type of iconography, vocabulary of style, ornamentation, palaeography, and particular details). (2) Monuments from Taochlardjeti, Vaspuracan, Byzantine monuments in Seljuk Anatolia, and Byzantine monuments from western Anatolia were surveyed. (3) The relation of archaeological evidence from Cappadocia to the decline of Byzantine civilization in Asia Minor was then considered. There are more than one thousand churches and religious establishments from this small province, and their percentile breakdown according to the periods concerning us here are as follows:

45 percent of the foundations date to the 150 years following the end of the Iconoclastic controversy.

30 percent of the foundations date to the eleventh century (prior to the fall of Caesarea to the Turks).

0 percent of the foundations date to the late eleventh and twelfth centuries.

8–10 percent of the foundations date to the thirteenth century.

These statistics, and thus the archaeological evidence from Cappadocia, agree and strongly reinforce the written sources on the fate of Byzantine civilization in Anatolia from the eleventh to the fourteenth century. The ecclesiastical institution flourished up to the late eleventh century. As a result of the turbulence and nomadic character of the Turkish invasions of the eleventh-twelfth century, the Christian communities were disastrously affected. The stabilization of political life in the thirteenth century permitted a very modest and ephemeral revival of the Christian communities.

In his contribution, "George Acropolites and the Intellectual Life of Nicaea," Milton Anastos dealt with the state of formal Greek culture in Asia Minor after 1204, and specifically with literary production. His brief survey of the principal authors and their works indicated the vitality and persistence of the Greek tradition in literature, history, philosophy, theology, and science. The emperors of Nicaea, particularly John Vatatzes and Theodore II Lascaris, supported learning, schools, and libraries, and the array of scholars born in Asia Minor or active there included Michael Acominatus, Nicetas Choniates, Nicephorus Blemmydes, Theodore Scutariotes, George Pachymeres, Theoleptus of Philadelphia, Nicephorus Gregoras, Theodore Metochites, Maximus Planudes, Gregory Sinaites, Andreas Livadenus, John Eugenicus, Gregory Chioniades, Bessarion, and Mark of Ephesus. A more detailed consideration of the lives and activities of Nicephorus Blemmydes and George Acropolites revealed the breadth of learning, the extensive knowledge of classical authors, and the existence of numerous teachers in western Asia Minor during this era. The standards of historiography exhibited by Acropolites, Scutariotes, Pachymeres, and Gregoras (all of whom had spent the first two decades of their lives in the realm of Nicaea) are high. The learned Mag-

nesian monk who composed the hagiographic *Vita* of John III had access to a good classical library—Homer, Hesiod, Herodotus, five Platonic dialogues, Aeschylus, Euripides, Aristophanes, Xenophon, Demosthenes, Porphyry, Clement of Alexandria, and the *corpus paroemiographorum*. Nicephorus Blemmydes in particular, and the entire Anatolian group in general, constituted the link through which Greek literary culture in its Byzantine manifestations was transmitted to Constantinople after the Latin interlude, and thus prepared the way for the Palaeologan renaissance.

Anthony Bryer, "Greeks and Türkmens: the Pontic Exception" (*supra*, p. 113), examines the social and geographical factors in the Trebizondine area to explain why the general pattern of cultural change observable elsewhere in Asia Minor during the later Middle Ages was not operative in the Trebizondine state. Here the will to resist, local autonomy, leadership, and a centralized state stood in the path of the nomads, and only when these factors disappeared did the situation change. Though there are known instances of Byzantine-nomadic symbiotic relations in western Asia Minor, there is very little evidence of the type of political symbiosis between Greeks and nomads observable in the regions of Trebizond. The geographical dimensions of this relationship were formed by the narrow coastal region of the Trebizond state, which was occupied by Greeks, the highlands occupied by the nomads, and the intervening summer pasturelands which constituted the *udj* (border). This is, in fact, an oversimplification, for in the westernmost Trebizondine regions there are stretches where the mountains descend abruptly into the sea, and there are also two breaks in the mountains where the Halys and Iris Rivers empty into the Black Sea. In the thirteenth-fourteenth century various tribal groups had entered these areas, resulting in a Turkmen emirate at Limnia on the Iris delta and another in Chalybia. Alexius III Comnenus married his daughter to the emir of Limnia and his sister to the emir of Chalybia, and so integrated these emirates into the Trebizondine state network. The Comnenoi also effected alliances with the chieftains of the Cepni and Akkoyunlu, but were unable to reduce them to the

status of tame emirs within their political orbit. By and large, Trebizondines did not suffer the same degree of displacement and shocks sustained by Byzantine society elsewhere in Anatolia. The Ottoman conquest itself was swift and conservative, with the result that the *epibiosis* of Byzantine society and culture in this district was much more substantial than elsewhere in Anatolia.

The last paper, "Islamization in Anatolia" by Speros Vryonis, dealt with the final step of cultural transformation, the religious conversion, which absorbed the bulk of Greek-Christian Anatolians into the body of Turkish-Muslim society. In the eleventh century, Anatolia had been overwhelmingly Christian (Greek, Armenian, Syrian, Georgian) and the Greek Church possessed forty-seven metropolitanates and over four hundred bishoprics. By the fifteenth century, there remained only seventeen of the former and three of the latter. The Ottoman tax records of the sixteenth century remark that 92.4 percent of taxable households in Anatolia were Muslim, and only 7.5 percent were Christian. These statistics confirm the magnitude of the cultural transformation which had transpired during the intervening centuries. Certain negative and positive factors determined this change. Negative factors which prepared the Christian Anatolians for transformation were the prolonged, disruptive, and nomadic aspects of the conquests, which undermined Byzantine civilization by removing its two principal

guardians, the Byzantine state and Church. Positive factors working for Islamization were first and foremost the predominance of Muslim states. The sultans eventually became traditional Muslim rulers who built towns, protected the rural areas, and established the traditional Islamic state, particularly patronizing the institutions of the Islamic faith. The basic economic institution was the *waqf*, or pious foundation, which acquired en masse the former Christian lands, incomes, and serfs, and harnessed them to Islamic institutions—mosques, *medresses*, hospitals, caravanserais, etc. As adherents of the religion of the conquerors Muslims enjoyed great social prestige, whereas Christians were relegated to the legal status of second-class citizens. In the beginning, the Christian subjects were integrated into a society whose rhythm and style were Muslim. Within this Muslim society, the most vital proselytizing element consisted of the dervish orders, who made a direct appeal to the Greek Christians by an emotional and mystical approach to religion, emphasizing a variety of devices which included music, dance, poetry, vernacular Greek, and a free equation of similar Muslim-Christian practices and holy figures. It was this Islamic society which eventually absorbed the leaderless and disoriented Christian communities and thereby inaugurated a new era in the history and culture of Asia Minor.